

# Seventy Years Airborne

## *A History of No. 1 Fighter Squadron and its Antecedents*

By John Yoxall



THE origin of our premier squadron is not wrapped in mystery, but its roots do go back right into the very beginnings of air force in Great Britain.

At Woolwich Arsenal in 1878 experiments were begun with military balloons, directed by Capt. R. P. Lee of the Royal Engineers. After the unit had been operating for some twelve months it was established that Britain possessed a "thoroughly sound and reliable fleet of five balloons."

One of these balloons accompanied the troops on manoeuvres that year, and in the review held at the conclusion of the exercises Capt. H. Elsdale, who was in charge of the party, passed the saluting base in the car of the balloon, "flying" at 250ft. The ground transport and towing arrangements were in the charge of Capt. J. L. B. Templer, who was the officially appointed Instructor in Ballooning and who, later, with the rank of colonel, became the first superintendent of the Balloon Factory—the fore-runner of the R.A.E.

Some four years later, in 1882, when military ballooning had been pronounced a success, the unit was removed to the School of Military Engineering at Chatham to start a small balloon factory, depot and school. Major Lee was in charge of flying and Major Templer in charge of construction.

Balloons saw service in Bechuanaland in 1884, under Sir Charles Warren, and again in 1885 in the Sudan, but on the return from these two expeditions official backing for a regular balloon section was lacking, and it was only the enthusiasm, and partly the financial aid, of Majors Elsdale and Templer which kept things going.

In addition to his great interest in military aeronautics, Major Elsdale was a pioneer in aerial photography, and we are fortunate in being able to reproduce an unretouched air photograph of the Balloon Camp at Lydd, taken by him in 1886. It has been kindly loaned to us by Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, K.B.E., C.B., C.M.G., D.Sc., F.R.S., who was present in the camp as Lt. C. F. Close, R.E. Sir Charles has compiled a scrap-book on military ballooning in which, among many items, it is interesting to read of the mode of military transport of aircraft in the eighties. "The wagons (1 Balloon Wagon, 3 or 4 Tube Wagons and 1 G.S. Wagon) were towed by a 'steam sapper' at four to five miles per hour. The Commanding Officer rode ahead in patrol jacket, riding breeches, jack boots and sword, followed by a sapper carrying a red flag in accordance with road regulations."

Another interesting note in the scrap-book is the data for Short Bros. balloons. For the latest strapped 10,000 cu ft

type, the envelope weighed 85 lb, the net 50 lb, valves 4 lb and car 20 lb.

In 1890, after a favourable report by Sir Evelyn Wood, the Balloon Section was introduced into the British Army as an established unit of the Royal Engineers and, after various moves, settled down in Aldershot.

The last year of the nineteenth century saw the South African War in progress, and four balloon sections were on active service. How much use they proved to be is difficult to assess. Certainly they enabled a General fighting a battle, to know to some extent what was going on in the enemy's lines. Signalling, however, was only by flag—either morse or semaphore—and was rather unsatisfactory.

Later came the natural development of balloons to airships, and in September 1907 the embryo No. 1 Fighter Squadron took on charge the first British Army airship, the *Nulli Secundus*. It is interesting to note that a special radiator for its 45 h.p. Antoinette engine was designed by a young man at the Factory, by the name of Geoffrey de Havilland, now, of course, Sir Geoffrey. The *Nulli Secundus* had a still-air speed of about 16 m.p.h., and its most famous flight was one which started at Farnborough and proceeded to London where the airship circled St. Paul's Cathedral and, being unable to make the return flight against the wind, finished at the Crystal Palace.

On the 28th of February, 1911, an Army order was issued creating the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers. The new battalion was divided into two companies; No. 1

*Squadron headquarters. An air photograph of surprising quality taken by Major Elsdale in 1886 of the Balloon School camp at Lydd in Kent.*

